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Ultra 'Secret': We Know Too Much, Too Little

The most important—and the most disturbing—secret of World War II has recently been disclosed. In "The Ultra Secret", Group Captain F. W. Winterbotham reveals that the British broke a German secret radio code. Well before America's entry into the war and continuing until V-E Day, messages between the Nazi High Command and German field generals were deciphered by the British within hours, often within minutes of their dispatch.

"Ultra" played a vital role in every major Anglo-American military campaign against the Germans. Winterbotham maintains that without information from "Ultra" that the German army was cracking, British and American forces would have moved eastward much more cautiously and would have lined the Russians at the Rhine rather than at the Elbe. All of Germany would have been under Soviet control. Journalist Alfred Friendly, who was a member of the Ultra group, says that Ultra "made victory possible in 1945."

The tremendous strategic and tactical advantages accruing to British and American forces as a consequence of this historic intelligence breakthrough raises an ugly question: Why did not the Anglo-American Command share this information with the Soviet Union which, after all, was engaging the bulk of the German forces? Conceivably, if the information had been shared, the war could have been concluded even sooner than the spring of 1945, thus saving millions of lives. A school of historians, the "revisionists", has long claimed that the Western Allies pursued a peripheral strategy—North Africa, Sicily, Italy—instead of mounting an early frontal assault on Normandy, at least, to exhaust the Russians. They will surely now claim that failure to share "Ultra" with Moscow proves their point.

But before they seize their pens, they might do well to ponder a less

the information might be "turned" so that the code the antagonist knows you know will be used for false information, while a new and unbroken code will be employed for his true communications.

The extent to which nations will go to conceal their possession of Communications Intelligence is illustrated by Washington's actions early in the Vietnamese war. As the Pentagon Papers reveal, the Johnson administration could have used communications intelligence to prove to a skeptical public that Hanoi had indeed ordered attacks on the American destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf during the summer of 1964. But the information was too precious to be used for such a purpose. And in February 1965, President Johnson, despairing at the unwillingness of an articulate sector of American opinion to recognize Hanoi's deep involvement in the command and support of the Viet Cong in the South, ordered the evidence of this involvement to be published. The authors of the resulting white paper could have documented the administration's claim, convincingly—but only by the use of communications intelligence. As a consequence, they produced a thin and unconvincing document that served only to widen the administration's credibility gap.

Ultra was of immeasurably greater value to the British than our communications intelligence was in Vietnam. The issue was not credibility. It was survival. This source had to be preserved for the gravest possible threats—for example, an attempted invasion of England, itself. Thus, the British knew in advance of Goering's orders to the Luftwaffe when Coventry was targeted, but the population was not given warning to evacuate. When Oxford was on the target list, the Oxonians among the code-breakers made a sentimental pilgrimage to see the old Colleges, perhaps for the last time, but no special warnings were given to the Air Defense Command. The beloved

sinister, more plausible explanation. Communication Intelligence is the crown jewel in the vaults of every spy establishment skillful enough to acquire it. Many CIA, MI-6 or Deuxieme Bureau officers will grudgingly admit that many of their "secrets" can be divined from a close reading of The Washington Post, the London Times or Le Monde. But when they smugly add "except for the critical five per cent", they are referring to communications intelligence. It is this that makes the difference between "will" and "might", between "probability" and "certainty".

Even now, communications intelligence is held extremely closely, for continuing access to such vital information depends on the discrimination with which it is used. When a potential or actual enemy realizes that you know (not suspect, not guess, but know), years of painstaking effort can be lost and a nation's ability to anticipate future grave threats to its national survival could be jeopardized. There is also the awful possibility that

Actor Leslie Howard was sent on a secret mission in an unarmed, uncortorted plane even though the British apparently knew the Germans were going to intercept his aircraft.

The British decision not to share "Ultra" with Moscow may well have rested on a national fear that in some manner—perhaps by moving conspicuously and precipitately to repel "surprise" attacks on major cities—Soviet generals might reveal to the Germans that their code had been broken. Moreover, it is important to remember Churchill's persistent suspicion that the Soviet General Staff had been penetrated by the Germans. None of this is to say that the British did not warn Stalin of the impending German invasion of Russia in the spring of 1941. Stalin was indeed told by Churchill that "unimpeachable sources" had revealed that Hitler was planning to move eastward. But Stalin ignored the warning. Before making a final judgment, we must ask how much did Moscow know about German plans and intentions which it did not choose to share with London and Washington?

One can speculate, but having allowed publication of the details of Ultra, the British have opened a Pandora's box. We know both too much and too little. To stop a flood of unhealthy suspicion and a torrent of recrimination, London must now tell us more.

5064.01.2 The Ultra Secret
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